

THE ISRAELI-ARAB CONFLICTS: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE 2006 ISRAELI-HAMAS-HEZBOLLAH CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

The region of the world known as the Middle East has witnessed complex and enormous conflicts which require consistent and persistent radical approach to peace initiatives. Since the end of the Second World War in 1945, the region has witnessed frequent hostilities between the Arabs and Israel. The 2006 conflict between Israel and the Hezbollah in Lebanon was an expose of the keen competition for military supremacy between Israel and the “terrorist” organisation – the Hezbollah. This paper seeks to examine the historical background of the crisis in this region and the root causes of the Israeli-Hamas-Hezbollah conflict in 2006 and suggest possible ways for comprehensive peace in the region. It is the position of this paper that lack of concrete efforts and commitment by the international community to look for a peaceful resolution of the conflict anchored on compromise, equity and mutual respect among the warring groups complicated the situation. There is no gainsaying that years of lack of attention and culpable neglect have crippled forces of pragmatism throughout the region and the achievement of peace immeasurably more difficult. It was expected that the Israeli-Hamas-Hezbollah conflict would have formed a plank for endurable peace settlement in the Middle East region. This paper will therefore examine why such expectation became a mirage.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Adjudication, Dispute Resolution, Negotiation, Conflict

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MIDDLE EAST CRISES

The Middle East region lies across the shortest route between Europe and Asia, and it has about fifty percent of the world’s oil reserve, which makes it an enviable region. As enviable as the status of this region might seem, the inhabitants of the Middle East have been the most embattled since the Second World War. The region has hosted many wars between the Israelis and the

Arabs. Even though Islam is the dominant religion in the Middle East, clear ideological differences exist between the countries in the region which results in frequent clashes, even amongst fellow Moslems. Both internal and external interest groups have tried to maneuver within the status quo, thereby making the Middle East the most treacherous political arena in the world.

Despite intensive human efforts, this region, which is the cradle of civilization and the birth place of three great religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – does not enjoy the blessings of peace. The State of Israel as it exists today encompasses a substantial portion of what was called Palestine. Over the period of many centuries, Arabs and Jews have developed deep historical roots in Palestine and strong emotional attachment to it. In the 19th century, out of this entangled roots and attachments emerged two nationalism – the Arab nationalism and political Zionism with both laying claims to the same land. It was the confrontation of these two incompatible nationalisms that produced the trouble of “Palestine Question” and the bitter Arab-Israel antagonism (Bright, 1951).

The Jews had their first contact with their “promised land” about 1800BC when Abraham led his people to the outskirts of Palestine area, much of which was controlled by the Canaanites. Later Abraham’s descendants migrated to Egypt, where they multiplied and lived for centuries before Moses led them out again. The Jews returned to Palestine around 12th CBC, but remained weak and divided until Saul united them into one Kingdom. Saul’s successor, David extended the country’s borders, and his son, Solomon built the first temple in the City of Jerusalem during the 10th CBC. This first united kingdom later divided into two kingdoms; Judah and Israel which provided the religious and emotional basis for Jewish interest in Palestine and the Zionist claim to their “Promised Land” (Bright, 1951).

Up to the time of Jesus Christ, the Jews occupied much part of Palestine. A new wave of dispersion of the Jews to other lands began in 135AD when the Romans captured the land. When the Byzantines took possession of the land, many Jews were massacred and others fled out and dispersed to other lands. Palestine came under the Arabs when Byzantine was defeated in 636AD. When the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453 AD, Palestine became part of the Ottoman Empire for four hundred years. During these years, less than 500 Jews remained in Palestine. They had dispersed to Europe, America and Russia (Hardy, 1968).

When the Zionist movement was founded by Theodore Herzl in 1892 to encourage the Jews to return home, pioneers came to Palestine to rebuild the Hebrew civilization, but the Arabs were already there. More than 100,000 Jews had settled in Palestine by 1914. As the First World War was raging, a British officer in the Middle East issued what is today referred to as the Balfour Declaration in November 1917. This declaration called for the establishment in Palestine a “National home for the Jewish people”. At the end of the First World War, Palestine became British mandate. During the mandate period between 1920 and 1948, there were conflicts in Palestine which centered on the major issues of immigration and land purchase. The Arabs wanted land purchase restricted and Jewish immigration regulated, curtailed or stopped. The Zionists, seeking majority status, required unlimited immigration, unrestricted rights of land purchase, for the idea and dream of their

homeland to be actualized. By 1933, Jewish immigration to Palestine had risen tremendously, and in 1935 alone, 62,000 immigrants came into Palestine (Hardy, 1968).

ISRAEL AS AN INDEPENDENT STATE

In the aftermath of the First World War, the League of Nations made Palestine a British mandate. However, by 1947, the violence directed at British officers by the Jews and the Arabs, and the financial drain on the declining imperial power after the Second World War, moved Britain to turn to the United States for help. In April 1947, the Arab nations proposed at the United Nations that Palestine be declared an independent state, but the measure was defeated.

As the violence continued among Jews, Arabs and British officials in Palestine before and after the Second World War, Britain asked the United Nations in 1947 for a recommendation on how to deal with the problem. The murder of millions of Jews by the Nazi Germany and the deplorable state of the holocaust survivors had stimulated the international effort to establish a sovereign Jewish state in Palestine. As a result of this agitation, in November 1947, the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to recommend the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish States. The two states were to be joined in an economic union and Jerusalem would be administered by the United Nations.

According to Ari-Yonah (1976), the Arabs would get 43 percent of the land and the Jews 57 percent. On May 14, 1948, the British official left Palestine and the Jewish

State was proclaimed that evening. The truce between Israel and several Arab states was negotiated by the United Nations. On May 11, 1949, Israel was accepted as a member of the United Nations Organisation. The Arabs have since then refused to recognize Israel as a political independent nation. This has led to series of wars between Israel and the Arabs since 1949. Israel appears to have come out victorious at the end of each war.

UNITED STATES AND THE POLITICS OF OIL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

According to Richman (1991), if the chief resources of the Middle East was bananas, the region would not have attracted the attention of the US policy makers as it has done for decades. The history of oil exploration in this region began with the British Navy's plans for what became known as the Great War of 1914-18. The British intended to use petroleum extracted from this region to provide its Navy the crucial strategic advantage of changing to oil-burning from coal-burning warships. Since that time, observers in international politics know that the Middle East has been dominated by the great powers' struggle over the control of the special, strategically economic advantages of oil extracted from this region.

Americans became interested in the oil riches of the Middle East region in the 1920s, and two US companies – Standard Oil Company of California and Texaco, won the first concession to explore for oil in Saudi Arabia in the 1930s. They discovered oil there in 1938. The same year, Gulf Oil (along with its British partners, Anglo-

Persian oil) found oil in Kuwait. During and after the Second World War, the region became a primary object of U.S. foreign policy. It was then that policy makers realized that the Middle East was “a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history” (Yergin, 1993). Subsequently, as a result of the cooperation between the US government and several American companies, the United States replaced Great Britain as the Chief Western power in the region.

Nearly everything the United States has done in the Middle East can be understood as contributing to the protection of its long-term access to Middle East oil, and through that control, the US’s claim to world leadership. As Yergin (1993) observed, during the US-British negotiations over the control of Middle East oil, President Roosevelt of the United States sketched out a map of Middle East and said to the British Ambassador “Persian oil is yours. We share the oil of Iraq and Kuwait. As for Saudi Arabia oil, it is ours”. On August 8, 1944, the Anglo-American petroleum Agreement was signed, splitting Middle East oil between the United States and Britain. Since then, the US has used both covert and overt operations to maintain its hold on the Middle East oil.

An example of aggression exhibited by the United States to maintain the status quo was her sacking of the Saddam Hussein government of Iraq and the stationing of her troops there to maintain “peace and security”. Saddam Hussein had emerged as a major power broker in the Middle East since

his successful war with Iran which most analysts had expected him to lose. The economic realities of that costly war, coupled with the dismal drop of the price of crude oil, had made Iraq desperate for hard cash to pay its debts and to rebuild its war-torn economy. As a result of this, the Iraqi strongman made decisive moves to effect a substantial increase on the commodity price for crude oil. One of those moves by Saddam Hussein was the invasion and annexation of Kuwait that was dealing in the oil business in a manner that was detrimental to Iraqi’s economic interest. There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein, in an attempt to “redress” an act which he perceived as bearing negatively on his country’s economy, exceeded his limits.

The United States’ intervention the way she did and her reason for doing so were suspicious. President George Bush offered several reasons for his response to Saddam’s actions. According to him, the military deployment in Kuwait against Saddam Hussein was to deter an Iraqi attack on Saudi Arabia and to ostensibly send Iraq away from Kuwait. Vowing to usher in a “new world order”, President Bush declared that, in the first test of the post-Cold War world, unprovoked aggression and the toppling of a “legitimate” government by a tyrant comparable to Hitler could not be tolerated.

President Bush insisted that the US intervention in the Gulf crisis was not about oil, but about aggression. He also defended his policy in terms of protecting the Americans held hostage by Saddam Hussein, but it was a known fact that these

Americans were not taken hostage until after the policy was launched. The hallowness of the Bush administration's reasons for intervening in the Gulf Crisis the way it did indicates that President Bush sees the Middle East as United States' sphere of influence in which rival interests may not compete. Saddam's offence did not lie in occupying a neighbour (China, the Soviet Union as well as Israel and others have done that before) or in having nuclear weapons (several unsavory states have them, and more were in the process of acquiring nuclear arsenals). Rather, his offence lay in upsetting the status quo in an area the United States had vowed repeatedly to go to war, if necessary, to prevent adverse change. Bush's action was a reaffirmation of US claims in the Middle East, in case anyone thought that the end of the Cold War made the United States obsolete.

THE 2006 ISRAELI-HAMAS-HEZBOLLAH CONFLICT: ROOT CAUSES

The attack on July 12, 2006 in Northern Israel by Hezbollah in which two Israeli soldiers were kidnapped elicited an Israeli military response that embroiled the region in a multidimensional conflict. Though the primary combatants were part of a triangular dynamics in which Israel was at war with Hezbollah in Lebanon and with Palestine militants, including Hamas in the Gaza strip, there were secondary players who added additional layers of complexity in the conflict, namely Iran and Syria. The two countries played significant roles in arming, training and financing Hezbollah,

and to a smaller extent Hamas, and have used the Lebanese Shiite organisation as a proxy to further their own goals in the region.

Events and pronouncements showed that Iran may have had aspirations to become the dominant power in the Middle East, and many in the international community were closely focused on its potential weapons of mass destruction capability. In this light, the fighting in Southern Lebanon was viewed by some observers in international relations as a contest between two of the Middle East's most bitter rivals and most powerful actors in the region, Israel and Iran (via Hezbollah by proxy).

Before Hezbollah came on the scene, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) used Lebanon as a base to wage a guerilla war against Israel. Repeated PLO-Israeli clashes in Lebanon helped ignite the 15-year long Lebanese civil war (Ranstorp, 1997). With the PLO long expelled from Lebanon, and the Syrian armed forces no longer in Lebanon, and at a major technological disadvantage vis-à-vis Israel's conventional forces, the Hezbollah had to step in to fill the power vacuum in Southern Lebanon and continued to threaten Israel with the full support of its foreign patrons – Syria and Iran. Syria seeks the return of the Golan Height which it lost to Israel in the June 1967 Six Day War and finds non-state groups like Hezbollah and other Palestinian terrorist organisations based in Damascus as useful proxies (Ranstorp, 1997).

THE SEARCH FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

With frequent clashes between Israel and the Arab nations in the Middle East, for many decades it has become obvious and glaring that peace has remained elusive in the region. This is in spite of the zest and strenuous efforts with which it would appear to have been pursued in the region. However, this is not to say that no progress has been made in the search for peace. There have been several resolutions and accords towards achieving peace in the region, e.g. the Camp David Accord, the Venice Declaration, the Oslo Accord, etc.

The Camp David Accord was a historic peace initiative made on September 17, 1978 by the then President of Egypt, Mr. Muhammad Anwar Al-Sadat and the then Prime Minister of Israel Mr. Menachem Begin, with President Jimmy Carter of the United States presiding. The peace initiative created an unprecedented opportunity for peace in the Middle East then, but this great opportunity for peace in the Middle East was lost as the process was a nexus of complexities.

After the Camp David Accord, fifteen years later, the Oslo Accord became the platform on which the peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine were based. The Oslo Accord initiated by Israel and Palestine in 1993 in Oslo, Norway, was signed in a “historic” Washington ceremony hosted by President Bill Clinton of the United States of America on September 13, 1993 during which PLO Chairman, Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin grasped hands in an uneasy, yet

unforgettable handshake. The goals to be achieved by these accords were the complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza strip and the West Bank, and the Palestinians’ right to self-rule in those territories. These goals were contained in an agreement which were later signed by Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). The agreement was later accompanied by “Letter of Mutual Recognition”.

In signing of those letters, Israel officially recognized for the first time the Palestine Liberation Organisation as the legitimate representative of Palestinian people. And for the first time, the PLO recognized Israel’s rights to exist, renounced terrorism, rescinded its call for Israel’s destruction, and accepted the principle of land for peace. But since after these peace initiatives and agreements, the principal actors in the Middle East conflict have resorted to violence in settling their differences.

The solution to peace in the Middle East can hardly be sought from the barrel of the gun. The debris which have accumulated since the armed encounter in the region and the complications which have further arisen as a result, demonstrated beyond doubt how ineffectual wars could be in providing durable peace in the Middle East. For peace to reign no one party in any conflict in the region can hope to permanently intimidate and force its will on the other. But more than anything else, peace can only be attained on the basis of compromise.

To this extent, Israel’s dream of a God-given promised land represents a

serious obstacle to peace and compromise since resolute stand by Israel because of her military superiority only makes peace a dim possibility. On the other hand, the Arabs must reassure the Israelis unequivocally that Israeli borders are free from threat, aggression and suicide bombing of any kind. The United States too, which has been rather partial in its use of veto power at the UN Security Council in favour of Israel, has to be more restrained in the interest of peace in the region. While providing a parental care to the state of Israel, it must also be alive to its moral duties as a Security Council member to apply subtle pressure to both sides and bring them to respect world opinion.

Since the collapse of the peace process in late 2000, none of the region's parties (Israel or the Arabs) has displayed the requisite capacity or willingness to reach an acceptable compromise, while the international community appears to have shown more fecklessness than resolve. The recant hostilities between Israel and Hamas in Lebanon in May 2021 must serve as a wakeup call. So long as the political roots of the Arab-Israeli conflicts are not addressed, peace will continue to elude the Middle East.

THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICTS AND WORLD POLITICS

The Middle East conflict, as we have it today, has taken a center stage in world politics. So much so that no scholar or analyst discussing issues in world politics can be successful without a comprehensive understanding of Middle East politics. In today's international relations, the most

inextricable and complex problems occur in the Middle East. To date, the problems in the region seem to have defied solution. The multi-dimensional conflicts in the region have created a difficult political climate there.

It is on record that the Middle East region has been a major focus of global geopolitical power play which has to a great extent determined the course of world politics. During the Cold War, the United States and its former rivalry, the USSR had always maintained distinct Middle East policies which reflect their national interests and have equally used their military, political and economic powers to assert them in the region. The other medium powers and economic giants like Great Britain, France, Germany, China and Japan have unique interest in the affairs of this region because of the near dependence of their economies on the oil resources of the Middle East. Within this region, there is a keen competition for supremacy between the Arab, Israeli and Iranian power blocs. So far, a delicate equilibrium has been maintained in the Middle East by the skillful balancing of all the interests, which manifests themselves in the region.

The international response to the Middle East crises has somehow moved from building incentives for peace, to using sanctions. The European Union and the United States of America have at one time or the other imposed sanctions on the Hamas government in Palestine, insisting that it must recognize Israel, suspend violence and respect agreements that have been made. In any sane ordering of the world's strategic

economic affairs, the Middle East oil will continue to be an outstanding factor in the petroleum supplies of the world economy for many years to come. This is the more reason why the United Nations and other peace loving members of the international community must not wait for too long to see that permanent peace returns to this economically viable region.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

It is often said that war, in many ways, is a game of chance. At the start of hostilities, neither side knew what the final outcome would be or how long it would take to reach that outcome. It is this uncertainty of that outcome that allows each side to believe that it will benefit more by fighting than negotiating. The conflict in the Middle East is the struggle for existence and survival of the Jews in Palestine on one hand, and the struggle for identification, occupation of land and self-determination of the Arabs in Palestine on the other hand.

After 73 years of its creation, the State of Israel has become a reality that cannot be ignored. This is a fact that the Arabs have persistently failed to recognize. To achieve a lasting peace in this region, both Israel and Palestine must reach an unambiguous agreement as regards the occupied territories. Another thing the region needs now for peace to reign is a peaceful negotiation based on justice and fair play. The international community through the united Nations must make haste to set in motion a new political order in the Middle East, anchored on a give-and-take compromise, equity and mutual respect-

attributes which many scholars in conflict resolution contend are imperative for peace and stability in that region.

A new peace mechanism must be comprehensive and inclusive, enabling all parties with a recognized stake in the outcome to participate. What this means is that, for peace to endure in this region, all those who have been most deeply affected by conflict must be involved. All the actors involved in any peace process must not forget that peace requires respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the region and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.

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